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Atari Online News, Etc.
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With Contributions by:

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->From the Editor's Keyboard              "Saying it like it is!"
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It's November already! The leaves are falling (and falling and falling!)
and the weather is more cool and wet. I can't believe it! Wasn't it just
a few weeks ago that I was regaling about the unofficial start of summer??
I must have blinked, and it's gone! Sigh.

There's so much going on these days that I can't decide what to focus on
this week. Politics? Yuck. The economy? Hurts too much! Flu season?
I wrangled around the usual means to get a flu shot because my usual
flu clinic has been delayed, and delayed again. So, I booked an appointment
through my PCP (Primary Care Physician) and got a shot by that means. Of
course, I now have a cold, but nothing to do with getting my shot! How about
the war? Hmmm, I mean wars. How do we get out with our head raised? Not
sure that's feasible, but we'll see. I don't know - too much going on and not
enough time to learn a lot about what's happening. I just know that things
aren't good, but I think we all knew that anyway.

So, rather than go on with my opinions this week, I'm just going to try and
relax, take a few aspirin, and maybe hit the sack early for a change. And
while I do all that, why not catch up on what's happening this week in A-ONE!

Until next time...

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                         PEOPLE ARE TALKING
                       compiled by Joe Mirando
                          joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone and I've
been saving up the few meager messages that've come across the UseNet,
and well take a look at them in a bit.

But before we do, I just want to talk about what happened at Fort Hood
the other day. As I write this, 13 people are dead and 30 more injured.
That's a terrible loss no matter where it happens, but especially when it
happens on an army base in our own country.

I've never been to Fort Hood, but from what I gather, it's the size of a small city... or maybe a medium sized city. Imagine walking into a place like that and knowing it's all military personnel. We're talking tens of thousands of people here.

At this time, there's still a lot that isn't known. Heck, it was barely 12 hours ago that they were saying that the shooter was also dead. Of course, by the time you read this, that may have changed again, but that makes little difference in the long run. It's really not about whether "we got him", is it? It's about the loss of life, about the best among us, those who choose to serve, being cut down, but not in battle or in overt protection of their country, but while 'standing down', while not active. It is a terrible loss to all of us no matter what.

I haven't heard too much of it yet, but I'm guessing that, before too long, there'll be lots of people pointing out that the shooter was Muslim, like that explains why he 'snapped'. Some will see a vast conspiracy, some will see incompetence. There will be those who will point out that he's had less than stellar performance reviews, that he just got his degree or had just become a doctor, or that he was "just another one who wanted a free education".

Which, if any, of those things turns out to be true is really irrelevant right now. What is relevant is that at least 13 people have lost their lives and countless more have had their lives changed forever.

Our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families.

I just happened to glance at a news site and the story about the shooting in Orlando is just hitting now. At this point, eight people are wounded, seven of them critically. By the time you read this, there will no doubt be more information available, so there's not much use of me talking about it except to wonder aloud why they keep mentioning the fact that it happened in a "sixteen story building". I guess that when you've got to fill column inches, you've got to fill column inches.

I had planned on hammering you about health care again this week, but it just doesn't seem appropriate now. Not with these two incidents going on.

But we DO need to talk about health care. Next week. You've been warned. [grin]

Okay, let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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I think we may have covered this a while back, but its an interesting subject so we'll look at it again. Ely asks about solid state devices like SD cards on the ST:

"Is there any sort of interface that would allow me to use a CF or SD card as storage on an ST?

I want to copy off all the files off my 3.5inch floppies but most of them won't read on my PC (many are formatted for 82Tracks10Sectors). Just thought this might be an idea to get round the problem."

Thorsten Gˆ…nther tells Ely:

"An IDE interface would, provided you use a BigDOS partition and an IDE2CF
adapter cable. And of course there is the UltraSatan SD card drive.

Floppy Image by Pera Putnik reads and writes 10 sector disks on your PC."

Guillaume Tello advertises a new page on his website:

"A new page on my site:

http://pagesperso-orange.fr/gtello/aste_e.htm"

And then continues to tell us that there are...

"... some screen views of the GENEVA multitasking system on a STE.

Click on the "GENEVA" link on this page:
http://pagesperso-orange.fr/gtello/aste_e.htm"

Ronald Hall echos my thoughts (and I'll tell you why in a moment) when he
says:

"I've always liked the NeoDesk/Geneva combo."

   I can remember being at an Atari show (don't remember which now) and
   reporting for STReport on some of the talks and seminars by big-wigs
   in the Atari world. One was Dan Wilga, Rick Flashman and Trisha
   Metcalf<sp?> of Gribnif Software. For some reason I had to leave the
   talk early. Afterwards, Rick found me and chided me for leaving early,
   saying that I'd missed the 'big news'... A project codenamed 'Magic',
   A multi-tasking system for all Atari 16/32 bit computers. Magic, of
   course, ended up being Geneva. It was, without any exaggeration,
   amazing. It really was kind of like magic. Multi-tasking on a machine
   that everyone, including the manufacturer, said could not be used for
   multi-taking because it lacked memory protection and a processor able
   to handle it. But work it did. And quite well too. It was, and still
   is, my OS of choice on the ST. As an early adopter of the
   Geneva/NeoDesk combo, I loaded it up on my STacy laptop (yeah, I DO
   have a big lap) and brought it with me to the Blue Ridge Atarifest,
   put on by Sheldon Winick down in Asheville, North Carolina. I walked
   into his store, and the people in the shop who knew me said something
   like, "Hey Joe, whatcha got there?" I said something taunting like,
   "Oh, I thought someone might be interested in seeing Geneva on my
   STacy!" Wellll, the crowd closed ranks around me and advanced on me
   like ghouls in Night of the Living Dead or something. "Brains... we
   want brainnnnns..." [grin] I gave a quickie demo of Geneva, showing
   everyone who wanted to see how well and how seamlessly it ran just
   about any applications we threw at it. It was really great! I mean,
   everyone ooh'd and ahh'd over it each time, and there was genuine
   excitement over it. I don't even remember if Gribnif made it to the
   show that year, but being the proverbial first kid on the block to
   have that particular toy is something I'll never forget. Now back to
   our regularly scheduled program.

Guillaume Tello, evidently never having used Geneva, asks:

"Are there software specially written for that system?"

Ronald Hall tells Guillaume:

"Hmm, I'm not really sure. I know Dan did release some
software for it, like the NeoDesk Commandline app, but I'm not sure about
anyone else doing anything specific for it.

Almost all well written TOS/GEM software worked under it though, and it
had a lot of built in options to help stubborn software run (for example,
shifting it down to single tasking mode and freezing everything else).

After I get my STacy fully worked over, it's probably what I'll run on it.

They actually do have a website up, but I think its pretty old:

http://www4.pair.com/gribnif/"

Ausl8 asks for help in finding a chess game:

"Hi all, I'm looking for a chess game that will run an an Falcon030. I've
had a look around but found nothing that will run so far. Any ideas?"

Adam Klobukiwski tells Ausl8:

"There are ports of GNU Chess for sure. Look at ftps."

'Laz' tells Ausl8 to...

"look at
ftp://ftp.funet.fi/pub/atari/games/gemchess09.zip
Runs under TOS."

Gerhard Stoll posts:

"there is a new version from SuJi.

- Some changes in the docu, Thanks to Peter A. West!
- SuJi use default values if it found an old "suji.inf"

SuJi is a replacement for MGSEARCH which is bundled with MagiC, but
it can also be used under other operating systems.

<http://home.ewr-online.de/~gstoll/> "

Peter West adds:

"In addition, Gerhard built in a powerful customizable directory
listing function in the last edition - this works with
deeply-nested files such as often found on CDs which defeat most
other listing programs."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and let's hope for a calmer, saner week, okay? In the meantime, keep your ear to the ground, your eye on the horizon, your shoulder to the wheel and your back to the wall. Sounds like a recipe for lots of chiropractor visits, doesn't it? Well, anyway, keep your ears open so you'll hear what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - China Rejects World of Warcraft!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""   Microsoft's Finally Got Game!
                                    New 'Call of Duty'!
                                    And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News   - The Latest Gaming News!
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              China Regulator Rejects World of Warcraft Game

Chinese players of World of Warcraft, one of the world's most popular online games, may be out of luck after a government regulator rejected an application from the game's new licensed operator.

The General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) has terminated Chinese Internet portal NetEase's application seeking approval for the game, the agency said in a statement posted on its website Monday.

NetEase violated a rule banning new account registration and collection of subscription fees during a trial period that started July 30, when the firm was ordered to "revise harmful content" in the game, it said.

World of Warcraft, developed by California-based company Activision Blizzard Entertainment, was previously licensed to another Chinese firm, The9, which ran the game in China for four years from 2005, earlier media reports said.

The online role-playing game had around five million active users in China, and The9's financial report showed it booked net revenue of 380 million yuan (56 million dollars) in the fourth quarter of 2008, the reports said.

NetEase announced in April that it had won a three-year license for the

game from Blizzard after The9's license had expired.

Analysts said it was uncertain if GAPP's rejection would lead to a permanent ban in China as NetEase in April received approval from the culture ministry, which is also tasked with regulating computer games.

"The chaos is mainly due to the vague demarcation of responsibilities between GAPP and the Ministry of Culture," said Liu Ning, a Beijing-based analyst with research firm BDA China.

"It is not yet certain what will happen - to be honest, it depends on who will finally win (in the turf war) - GAPP or the culture ministry," he said.

Microsoft's Finally Got Game

After Atari popularized the joystick in 1977, videogame developers spent years cramming more buttons onto the controller. Then along came Nintendo, with a motion-sensing controller for its Wii console that was less complicated, and more fun. Since Nintendo launched the Wii in 2006, it has sold more than 50 million units worldwide--about as many as its two rivals, Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3, combined.

As any fan of Super Mario Bros. knows, however, invincibility only lasts so long. In the first half of 2009, Nintendo profits fell 52 percent to $772 million, dragged down by a 43 percent decline in Wii sales. "The Wii has stalled," CEO Satoru Iwata told investors, citing a gap in the pipeline of must-have games.

Iwata should be worried about more than game development. Nintendo's archrivals, Microsoft and Sony, are poised to release their own motion-sensing devices in 2010, with Microsoft having the best chance to out-Wii the Wii. Its Project Natal product, announced in June, eliminates the controller entirely - instead of a player holding a gadget, a special device mounted beneath the TV uses a video camera, an infrared sensor, and software to identify a player's motions. The gamer's actual silhouette, not a generic avatar, can then be inserted directly into games.

I played an early prototype of Natal in May, and it makes the Wii controller's capabilities, once a breakthrough, seem crude. To win at Wii tennis, you basically just need to swing your wrist back and forth. In contrast, the Natal camera detects the subtle movement of your limbs. I tried a game called Ricochet, where you punch, kick, and head-butt a ball down a corridor to break apart bricks at the far end. It sounds simple, but because the Natal camera tracks the exact movement of each limb going after the careening ball, I really needed to reach for each shot. Microsoft isn't exactly known for simple products that work seamlessly - but the Xbox has been an exception, and if the final product delivers on what the prototype promises, Natal may be Microsoft's most graceful step forward in gaming yet.

Sony has a motion controller in the works, too: a handheld, wandlike device that pairs with a camera, splitting the difference between Wii and Natal. It doesn't have a name yet - but it does have an expected release date of spring 2010, earlier than Natal. Beating Microsoft to market is Sony's best chance at bringing the PlayStation 3 out of third place in the console wars.

Sony and Microsoft desperately need big hits. Both companies cut prices on their consoles by $100 this summer to pump up sales - an acknowledgment that the videogame industry is not, after all, recession-proof. Emphasizing platforms with intuitive, motion-based controls over those with complicated controllers is crucial to helping the videogame market expand beyond its base of young men. Nintendo is already there with games like Wii Fit, which appeals to families and adults.

At $50 billion and climbing, the global gaming market can accommodate all three big console makers. Until the new products - and the games that best exploit them - are out, it's impossible to say which will be the biggest winner. The smart bet, though, is on Microsoft and Sony to take a greater share of the videogame market. That's a perilous prospect for Nintendo, which doesn't have the same diversity of products and revenue streams to fall back on. Microsoft has Windows, Sony has its movie studio (and much more), while Nintendo is just a videogame company. And if it wants to remain the biggest, it had better get moving.

New 'Call of Duty' Could Set Entertainment Record

This holiday season's biggest entertainment blockbuster likely will be a sequel to a popular franchise, with jarring depictions of war and an intricate story of good versus evil. It could easily rake in more than last year's record $155 million opening weekend for "The Dark Knight."

But this blockbuster is not a movie.

It is "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2," a video game that Activision Blizzard Inc. is releasing Tuesday. Fans worldwide are expected to spend at least half a billion dollars on the game in the first week.

That would at least match last year's "Grand Theft Auto IV," which was the most successful video game release in history and might have been the top entertainment launch ever.

Justin Criswell, 31, plans to line up at a GameStop store in Brooklyn on Monday night so he can buy the new "Call of Duty" when it goes on sale after midnight, for $60. It's available for PCs, Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3.

"Ever since they announced it, me and most of the friends that I play with have been crazy excited about it," Criswell said. Once he gets a copy, he plans to stay up much of the night to play it online with friends and relatives scattered in Tennessee, California, Ohio and Florida.

"Those who have to work the next day have taken the day off," he said.

Like the previous five "Call of Duty" games, which are all rated "M" for mature (not for kids under 17), this one lets players shoot their way through a complex series of scenes. The game's developer, Infinity Ward, spent two years creating realistic graphics that are amplified in many players' homes by big-screen, high-definition TVs sets and powerful speakers. It's like stepping into a movie.

A big part of the game's appeal is in its multiplayer component - players can fight each other, whether they're at the same game console or in separate locations and connected online.

Or a player can dive in alone and get swept into the game's plot, which picks up where "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare," left off. That game ended with victory over a Russian terrorist, but he was just part of a larger conspiracy. This time, the target is an even more vicious leader of the Russian Ultranationalist movement. Settings include a snowbound Siberian base, a leafy American suburb and the burning streets of Washington, D.C. One trailer for the game shows a glimpse of action in outer space.

While video games are increasingly marketed to men and women of all ages as mainstream entertainment, the core demographic for "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2" is mainly guys.

For David Dague, 36, who lives in Chicago, the launch of "Modern Warfare 2" is like the beginning of football season for a sports fan. Because he can play the game with other people, joining up in "clans" or fighting against them, "Call of Duty" is like "paintball in a box," he said. Better yet, paintball on a couch.

"Playing against other living, thinking players becomes a competitive pastime," said Dague, who runs a Web community for adults who play multiplayer games on the Xbox 360. Dague said he plans to play "Modern Warfare 2" for about two hours at a time, two to three nights a week.

"I don't watch soap operas, I don't watch football. Multiplayer gaming is where my competitive spirit gets its outlet," he said.

Activision is working with retailers to plan more than 10,000 midnight openings in the United States, including most of the 4,300 GameStop Corp. stores around the country. It won't give numbers, but GameStop says pre-orders for "Modern Warfare 2" hit an all-time high.

In all, about 28 million "Call of Duty" games have been sold in the United States, with each installment doing better at launch than the previous one, said NPD Group analyst Anita Frazier. Optimism about the latest title led Activision on Thursday to reaffirm its outlook for 2009. It expects more than $2 billion in revenue for the current quarter - roughly half of the year's total.

Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter estimates Activision is spending as much as $50 million to market the game, including TV spots, billboards and ads on social-networking sites. Activision won't say how much the game cost to make, but most blockbusters require tens of millions of dollars.

For Criswell and Dague's generation, video games are entertainment on par with movies, except they last many more hours and immerse players in stories in which their actions affect the outcome.

Patrick Kienbauer, an 18-year-old student in Austria, said the game's last installment, which has sad background music and a "comfortless ambiance," let him "feel the cruelty and violence of war." He's already ordered a copy of "Modern Warfare 2" so he can get it as quickly as possible.

If this sequel does its job, it will not only pick up where the last one

ended but also advance the story in ways that will shock and surprise him - and keep him coming back for more.

No Doubt Sues Video Game Maker Over 'Band Hero'

No Doubt has sued video game maker Activision for putting words in band members' mouths.

The band on Wednesday sued Activision Publishing Inc. over a feature in the new "Band Hero" game that allows players to control virtual band members and have them sing other artists' songs.

The lawsuit claims a feature allows players to have lead singer Gwen Stefani perform suggestive lyrics from the Rolling Stones' hit "Honky Tonk Women." The suit also notes a virtual version of bassist Tony Kanal can be made to sing his band's hit "Just a Girl," but with Stefani's voice.

The game, an offshoot of Activision's popular "Guitar Hero" series, went on sale Tuesday.

The company, which is based in Santa Monica, Calif., said in a statement that it engaged in extensive negotiations with No Doubt's management and have a valid written agreement for their participation in "Band Hero."

"As a result, Activision believes it is within its legal rights with respect to the use and portrayal of the band members in the game and that this lawsuit is without merit," the statement said. "Activision is exploring its own legal options with respect to No Doubt's obligations under the agreement."

No Doubt's lawsuit states the band objected to the "Character Manipulation Feature" in "Band Hero" that allows players to use No Doubt's likeness to perform other bands' songs, but Activision refused to change the game.

The feature turns the band "into a virtual karaoke circus act," the lawsuit claims.

The band is seeking unspecified damages and an order barring Activision from using band members' likeness to perform other artists' songs.

In September, the widow and former bandmates of the late Kurt Cobain said they were dismayed that the likeness of the Nirvana frontman could be used to play songs by other artists in "Guitar Hero 5." Activision said they secured the necessary rights from the Cobain estate in a written agreement to use the singer's likeness as a fully playable character.

Taylor Swift and Adam Levine are the other musicians featured in the offshoot of the popular rhythm game franchise for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, Wii and Nintendo DS.

Previous "Guitar Hero" editions have featured the likenesses of Jimi Hendrix, Billy Corgan, Sting, Ozzy Osbourne, Carlos Santana, Johnny Cash and members of Aerosmith.

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            Experts Meet To Hash Out Web Privacy Rules

Hundreds of privacy experts from around the world met in Madrid on
Wednesday for a three-day conference which aims to arrive at a global
standard for the protection of personal data.

US Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano as well representatives
from data protection agencies from 50 nations and top managers from key
Internet firms like Google and Facebook are taking part in the event,
billed as the world's largest forum dedicated to privacy.

Artemi Rallo Lombarte, the director of the Spanish Data Protection
Agency, an independent control authority which is organising the 31st
International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy, said laws
regulating privacy vary greatly around the world.

"These differences are far from being an obstacle, they should instead
enrich our initiatives to promote the effective guarantee of rights
through a global convention for the protection of privacy and personal
data," he said in a opening address to the conference.

"This is one of the main goals of this international conference," he
added.

Participants hope the international standards reached at the gathering
will serve as the basis for a universal, binding legal instrument on
data protection.

An extensive international consensus already exists to limit data
processing to the purposes for which they were gathered and the need to
ask users for their consent regarding international data transfers,
organizers said.

Previous conferences on data protection and privacy have taken place in
Strasbourg, Hong Kong, Sydney and Montreal.

            Internet Seen Censorship Liable to WTO Challenge

Censorship of the Internet is open to challenge at the World Trade
Organization as it can restrict trade in services delivered online, a
forthcoming study says. A censorship case at the WTO could raise
sovereignty issues, given the clear right of member states to restrict
trade on moral grounds - for example, by blocking access to child
pornography websites.

But a WTO ruling could set limits on blanket censorship and compel states instead to use more selective filtering, according to the study, to be published on Thursday by think-tank ECIPE.

"Censorship is the most important non-tariff barrier to the provision of online services, and a case might clarify the circumstances in which different forms of censorship are WTO-consistent," said the study by Brian Hindley and Hosuk Lee-Makiyama.

"Many WTO member states are legally obliged to permit an unrestricted supply of cross-border Internet services," they wrote in their report, obtained in advance by Reuters.

Many countries censor the Internet for political or moral reasons. China has developed one of the most pervasive systems, in Cuba all unauthorized surfing is illegal, and many Western countries limit access to child porn sites.

Internet use is particularly strong in Asia. China, with 298 million people online, overtook the United States in numbers of Internet users in 2008, the study said.

Internet censorship can have a serious impact on businesses, it said, noting how local search engine Baidu, which follows official rules on censorship, has overtaken global leader Google in the Chinese market.

There have even been reports that the authorities rerouted requests for Google.com and other international search engines to Baidu's site.

In the third quarter of 2009 Baidu had 64 percent of the 2 billion yuan ($293 million) Internet search market in China, while Google had 31.3 percent.

Back in 2002, Baidu had 3 percent and Google 24 percent, the study said.

In Japan, where Google might face similar linguistic entry barriers to China, foreign-owned search engines have more than 90 percent of the market.

A challenge at the WTO by Antigua to U.S. laws restricting online gambling showed that a member's commitment - once made - to opening up in a sector takes precedence over subsequent bans and restrictions, even if they do not discriminate between domestic and foreign suppliers, the study noted.

And a WTO panel ruled against Chinese restrictions on imports of audio-visual entertainment, including the use of domestic distributors to control access to the material, in response to a U.S. challenge. China is appealing against that ruling.

WTO rules allow members to restrict trade to protect public morals or public order, but those measures must be necessary and disrupt trade as little as possible.

The study argues that a strong case can be made against disproportionate censorship that disrupts commercial activities by more than necessary to achieve the goals of the censoring government.

Proportionate censorship would mean selective filtering rather than arbitrary and entire blockages or permanent bans.

Some states might argue such filtering would impose an impractical burden, but others, such as China with its "Golden Shield" - known in the West as the "Great Firewall of China" - already have well-staffed infrastructure in place for selective censorship.

"There is a good chance that a panel might rule that permanent blocks on search engines, photo-sharing applications and other services are inconsistent with (WTO services) provisions, even given morals and security exceptions," it said.

Senate Panel Approves Data-Breach Notification Bills

The U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee has approved two bills that would require organizations with data breaches to report them to potential victims.

The Judiciary Committee on Thursday voted to approve both the Personal Data Privacy and Security Act and the Data Breach Notification Act by large majorities.

The Data Breach Notification Act, sponsored by Senator Dianne Feinstein, a California Democrat, would require U.S. agencies and businesses that engage in interstate commerce to report data breaches to victims whose personal information "has been, or is reasonably believed to have been, accessed, or acquired."

Feinstein's bill would also require agencies and businesses to report large data breaches to the U.S. Secret Service

The Personal Data Privacy and Security Act would also require that organizations that maintain personal data give notice to potential victims and law-enforcement authorities when they have a data breach. It would increase criminal penalties for electronic-data theft and allow people to have access to, and correct, personal data held by commercial data brokers.

The second bill, sponsored by Senator Patrick Leahy, the Judiciary Committee chairman and a Vermont Democrat, would also require the U.S. government to establish rules protecting privacy and security when it uses information from commercial data brokers.

Several tech groups have called for the U.S. Congress to pass national data-breach notification legislation. Since a series of high-profile data breaches in early 2005, about 45 states have passed data-breach notification laws.

It's difficult for companies to comply with the separate state laws, officials from cybersecurity product vendor Symantec have said.

Symantec CEO Enrique Salem sent a letter to the committee Wednesday in support of the Leahy data-breach bill.

The Leahy bill "is a major step forward towards enacting a comprehensive, uniform national framework to better prevent breaches of sensitive consumer information as well as setting a clear standard for effective notification should a breach occur," Salem wrote.

Symantec supports the bill's language saying that if personal data is encrypted or otherwise rendered unusable, organizations don't have to report the data breach, the letter said. The committee has recognized "there are widely accepted industry best practices and standards for data security that companies can look to as a road map for compliance when protecting electronic data," Salem wrote.

The Business Software Alliance, a trade group, also praised the committee for approving both bills.

"In recent years, hundreds of millions of individual records containing sensitive personal information have been involved in computer security breaches," BSA President and CEO Robert Holleyman said in a statement. "The frequency and severity of data breaches have prompted more than 45 states to pass data security laws, creating a confusing patchwork quilt of regulations."

Both bills now head to the full Senate for votes. The timeline for action in the Senate is unclear.

Dell Unveils Super-Thin Adamo XPS Laptop

Dell painted a picture in broad strokes Thursday of the company's forthcoming Adamo XPS laptop, which is slated to hit the market in time for the holidays. The new machine - which is housed in a finely machined aluminum case and comes in the user's choice of pearl or onyx - is even thinner than the inaugural Adamo laptop that Dell began shipping last March.

Measuring 13.4 x 10.7 inches and tipping the scales at just over three pounds, the new machine is just four-tenths of an inch in thickness, yet packs a host of high-tech goodies. With the Adamo XPS, however, Dell is clearly aiming to appeal to trend-conscious consumers looking for gadgets with more than a modicum of visual appeal.

"I think when you see Adamo for the first time, it's just a stunning, elegant, minimalist form," said Dell Senior Vice President Alex Gruzen. "We think the Adamo XPS will inspire an emotional connection with anyone who sees it."

Under the hood, the Adamo XPS sports a 1.4GHz Intel Core Duo processor, 13.4-inch high-definition display and 4GB of DDR3 memory. What's more, the machine's 128GB solid-state drive runs cooler than traditional hard drives and also boots up faster.

On the wireless side, the new laptop offers both high-speed Wi-Fi (802.11n) and Bluetooth, together with the requisite location-awareness technology for delivering local maps that show users where they actually are in real time. Dell's design team also did not compromise when it came to providing wired connectivity options, such as display and audio ports, two USB 2.0 connectors, and Ethernet connectivity via a dongle.

"So even though you have a very thin product, the user has the ability to stay connected - either through the landline or wireless, and still have enough ports to really be productive," said lead designer Nicolas Denhez.

Dell also has improved upon its initial Adamo design by making the battery that ships with the XPS both removable and user replaceable. In another twist, Dell said Thursday that the Adamo XPS, which will ship at prices starting at $1,799, includes a preinstalled copy of the 64-bit edition of Windows 7.

Though visual appeal was high on Dell's list of potentially lovable features, designers also took time to incorporate a few other little things for consumers to appreciate. For example, the Adamo XPS features a capacitive sensor on the lid that enables the user to open the latch by simply swiping a finger across it.

Once opened, the body of the Adamo XPS automatically elevates so that the keyboard becomes angled to enhance cooling. The machine's design team also managed to find a way to sculpt the individual keys so that every key cap is "a little bit scalloped," which makes typing very comfortable, Denhez noted. In other words, each key has had a series of curved projections cut along the edge.

With the Adamo XPS, Dell's goal is to carve out a niche in a struggling consumer market that has been very much price driven of late, with higher-priced systems not selling very well. "We are looking at a $700+ average selling price for this quarter," noted Mika Kitagawa, a principal analyst at Gartner.

Though Kitagawa has no detailed data on sales of the inaugural Adamo, she said she imagines that Dell's unit shipments would have to be quite small. "Design is becoming a more important purchase criterion," Kitagawa noted, "but consumers are not yet willing to pay a big price premium for it."

Microsoft Redesigns MSN, Adds Twitter, Facebook

Microsoft Corp. is giving its MSN Web portal a long-overdue makeover and says it hopes the new site will funnel more people to Bing, the software maker's search engine.

Microsoft is ditching the heavy blue background and stack of tiny text and menus across the top of the page that have defined msn.com for a decade.

The new site is cleaner, with a white background and simple, colorful links for "news," "entertainment," "sports," "money," "lifestyle" and "more" lined up across the top.

But it's still clearly a portal, filled with blocks of headlines. The most prominent real estate on the page is dominated by a slide show of the top five stories with big headlines and photos.

Some of what appears on the MSN home page will be picked by editors looking for top stories. They'll get an assist from new software that uses Bing to find hot topics just as they begin to simmer.

Other stories on the home page will appear based on a Web surfer's location or other details gleaned from his or her browsing behavior.

Microsoft's online services business is a money-losing venture, as advertising revenue has failed to make up for the money the software maker has poured into competing with Google Inc. in search.

Scott Moore, the executive producer for MSN in the U.S., said the site's main goal is to drive up Bing's search share. Bing, which launched in June, remains a distant third in search, after Google and Yahoo Inc.

In July, Web search became a two-team race when Microsoft and Yahoo announced that the Bing technology would be used behind the scenes on Yahoo's sites as well. That deal is awaiting regulatory approval.

The MSN redesign also shows Microsoft's growing interest in collaborating with operators of other popular sites, rather than simply trying to compete.

In a slim column on the right-hand side of the page, Microsoft displays Hotmail e-mails and status updates on Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft's own "Windows Live" service. People who have accounts on those services can log in to each to see a list of friends' updates and to post their own.

This refreshed msn.com is rolling out to a small percentage of U.S. users on Wednesday but won't appear for everyone until early 2010.

PCs Shed Pounds and CD Drives, Gain Touch Screens

Personal computers are changing - and not just because of the recent launch of Windows 7. Visit an electronics store and you might also find laptops are missing a familiar component. You could experiment with new ways of controlling some computers. And you'll see portable PCs slimming down.

Even with all the attention lavished on Apple's iPhone and Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle this year, your PC likely is still the center of your digital universe. Here's a look at what the season's computer trends mean for you.

Computers have come with "optical drives," slots for CDs or DVDs, for years. They've been useful for installing new software, watching movies or transferring music libraries into digital form. But one of the biggest lessons from the craze for "netbooks" - inexpensive little laptops designed mainly for browsing the Web - is that people were so excited about the small, easy-to-carry size that they didn't miss having a CD or DVD drive.

Apple Inc. got rid of an optical drive two years ago when it introduced the first sliver-thin MacBook Air. That wasn't seen as a trendsetting step at the time because the computer, which cost $1,800 then, wasn't meant for mainstream consumption. But netbooks, which start at $250 on BestBuy.com, surely are made for everyone. The wee laptops' popularity is proof that people are finding it easy enough to download software, movies and music to portable computers, especially with the widespread availability of Wi-Fi and cellular Internet service. And plenty of services let you store files over the Internet, eliminating the need to burn backups to
discs.

Taking out the optical drive doesn't significantly lower prices. Doing so does let PC makers design much thinner laptops. Companies including Dell Inc. and Hewlett-Packard Co. have pulled DVD drives out of mid-range to more expensive computers, such as HP's Pavilion dm3z, which starts at $550, all the way up to the $1,700-and-up HP Envy and Dell's $1,500-and-up Adamo.

You just might want to think twice if you're hooked on transferring CDs into MP3s - or if you spend a lot of time watching DVDs on airplanes and don't want to squint at your iPod screen or get a separate portable video player.

It might sound impressive when a PC sales pitch mentions multicore processors, state-of-the-art graphics chips, 4 or 6 or 8 gigabytes of memory and hard drives with a terabyte - 1,000 gigabytes - of storage. But another thing netbooks showed is that with a few exceptions   such as professional video editing, and maybe hard-core video-game playing - having lots of PC power is overkill.

There's very little software that can take advantage of these powerful computers, says technology analyst Rob Enderle. That means there's no "killer app," the program that's so cool or so useful it persuades everyday PC users to trade up.

While the microprocessors that act as the brains inside netbooks are less powerful than even those found in inexpensive full-sized laptops, they are sufficient for most Web browsing, e-mailing and word processing. And these computers are getting bigger hard drives, which you need for storing digital photos, music and video. Overall, they're good enough that to people replacing 3- and 4-year-old PCs, netbooks feel downright fast.

Go for more power only if you watch high-definition TV and films, or edit HD home movies. Those tasks would require beefier machines.

People want Internet access all the time, and PC makers are betting "smart" phones - even the iPhone - aren't big or ergonomic enough for anything more complex or time-consuming than a quick e-mail reply.

But already the line between phones and PCs is blurring: PC makers are teaming with mobile carriers to sell netbooks that cost as little as $99 as long as the buyer subscribes to a wireless data service. A new buzzword, "smartbooks," is emerging to describe a device that runs a smart-phone operating system such as Google Inc.'s Android but on bigger hardware that is more like a PC than a phone.

To get you to carry their laptops to the corner coffee shop, PC companies are treating their wares as fashion accessories, not just tools. You'll see more colors and patterns, more design-conscious shapes and upscale materials.

"Thin and light is sort of the new black," says Forrester Research analyst Paul Jackson.

The next frontier: cutting the cord for longer stretches. New chips that require less energy are emerging, and advances in battery technology are expected in the coming years to extend the time people can sit in the airport watching YouTube.

In 2007, the iPhone made "multitouch" mainstream. Unlike ATM screens, which recognize one finger pushing on one spot at a time, the iPhone's screen responds to pinching and swiping gestures made with multiple fingers. Microsoft Corp.'s coffee-table-sized Surface computer, designed for hotel lobbies and shops and also released in 2007, responds to similar gestures and can be operated by several people at once.

Now the PC is in on the action. Windows 7 includes more support for multitouch applications, making some basic touch commands work even on programs that weren't designed for it. You'll see more laptops and "all-in-one" desktops - computers that stash all the technology in the case behind the screen - with multitouch screens. HP, Dell and others have designed software intended to make it easy to flip through photos and music or browse the Web with a fingertip instead of a mouse.

Apple, for its part, has multitouch trackpads for laptops and a multitouch mouse but says it isn't interested in making a touch-screen Mac. Chief Operating Officer Tim Cook calls it "a gimmick."

Will multitouch replace the mouse and keyboard? Probably not, but that doesn't mean it won't become a useful part of the way you work with your computer. Watching someone who has used a touch-screen computer for several months is interesting - he'll reach to the screen to scroll down a Web page just as fluidly as he types and uses the mouse.

A Growing PayPal Could Soon Overshadow Parent eBay

Most people know eBay Inc. for its online marketplace, where deals abound on everything from gadgets to antique furniture. But soon, eBay's biggest business will likely be PayPal, the online payments service that has been growing steadily even as the economy has stumbled.

EBay has spent much of the past two years trying to improve its faltering marketplace business, hoping to increase buyers' trust and clean up the look of its Web site. In the meantime, PayPal has thrived as more consumers and merchants use it to send money online.

Its growth is expected to continue in spite of competition from Amazon.com Inc. and Google Inc., which have services that online retailers sometimes offer alongside PayPal.

PayPal bills itself as a shopper's online wallet. Users set up accounts and link them to bank accounts and credit cards, making it easy to transfer cash into the account. Then users can make payments through PayPal using either their cash balances or the underlying credit card. PayPal users can also send cash to someone based on as little information as an e-mail address or cell phone number.

But unlike what happens with a credit or debit card online, PayPal doesn't share your financial information with merchants. That brings peace of mind to people who might otherwise worry about shopping at a site they've never heard of.

PayPal, which began in 1998 as a way for people to beam cash from one Palm Pilot to another, was bought by eBay for $1.5 billion in 2002 and has been a steady performer. The service charges fees for certain transactions, and in the most recent quarter it reported $688 million in

revenue, a 15 percent jump from last year. As of the end of September, 78 million people had active PayPal accounts, up from 65 million a year ago.

To try to maintain its advantage, this week PayPal opened its system to third-party developers, which will mean PayPal can be built in to all sorts of applications. For instance, an iPhone app could let consumers order a pizza and pay for it with PayPal.

PayPal has kept its big lead in online payments largely because people find it convenient, and because it's hard to build a competing system. Shoppers and merchants both need to be using an online payment system for it to have any value. And every state and country has its own rules for e-commerce. PayPal has managed to navigate these waters - it accepts payment in 24 currencies - and analysts don't yet see Checkout By Amazon or Google Checkout as much of a threat.

John Donahoe, eBay's CEO, has said he expects PayPal to surpass the marketplaces business in revenue simply because PayPal targets all of e-commerce while eBay is one of many online sales sites.

"PayPal can go well beyond that in the next three to five years," he said in an interview this week.

The company projects PayPal's revenue will be between $4 billion and $5 billion in 2011. EBay's forecast for the marketplaces business, which includes the main eBay.com Web site and other sites such as Shopping.com, calls for $5 billion to $7 billion in revenue that year.

Donahoe also thinks PayPal can eventually make more money than the marketplaces business, even though PayPal's profit margins are lower.

PayPal's opportunities figure to expand with its new move to open its platform to outside software developers. The process took two years, said PayPal's president, Scott Thompson, largely because of the need to deal with banking regulations while keeping up the company's fraud protections. But from here the open platform should incur few costs for PayPal, Janney Montgomery Scott analyst Shawn Milne said.

More than 1,000 entrepreneurs have been testing the system, known as PayPal X. Among them is Michael Ivey, the founder and CEO of Twitpay, a startup that lets people send money over short-messaging site Twitter.

When Twitpay started last year it used Amazon's payments service to transfer funds. PayPal's huge user base clinched the decision to make the change, he said.

Further growth - be it on cell phones or the Web - will have restrictions, though. While PayPal boasts that more 3 million online retailers accept it for transactions (not counting merchants on eBay who accept PayPal), many vendors offer it alongside services from Google, Amazon and others, to give shoppers as many choices as possible. As PayPal shows up on more Web sites, these rivals could, too.

And because of PayPal's size, any hiccups can have big ramifications. In August, a series of breakdowns made the service unable to process any transactions worldwide for several hours.

But Thompson is confident. He credits the fact that the service saves people time by making it easier to shop online. "The world needs what we

do," he said.

Microsoft Lays Off 800 More Workers Worldwide

Microsoft Corp. says it is cutting 800 more jobs. That's in addition to the 5,000 layoffs it announced in January.

Lou Gellos, a Microsoft spokesman, said Wednesday the cuts are being made in offices around the globe. He would not say what specific product groups or job types are affected.

Gellos also says Microsoft had already let nearly all of the 5,000 go, in what was the company's first-ever widespread layoffs.

Microsoft also said in January it would continue to hire in key areas such as Web search. The software maker, based in Redmond, Wash., employed about 94,000 people as of the end of December 2008. At the end of September, about 91,000 people worked for Microsoft, indicating the company has added 2,000 jobs this year.

China Bans Tough Treatment of Young Web Addicts

China has issued rules banning the beating and confinement of youths being treated for Internet addiction after revelations of abuse at rehabilitation clinics, including the death of one teenager.

The regulations posted on the health ministry's website Wednesday stressed that restraint must be used in dealing with such youngsters as "the concept of 'Internet addiction' has not been fully defined".

It added: "Parents and teachers must analyse the causes and not arbitrarily condemn, hit or scold youths... intervention methods that restrict personal freedom are strictly forbidden and corporal punishment (is) strictly forbidden."

In August, the beating death of a teenage boy enrolled by his parents at an Internet addiction camp in southern China's Guangxi region provoked outrage across the country.

The 15-year-old's death led to the discovery of abuse and beatings at other similar clinics.

At the time, local press reports said China had up to 10 million teenage Web addicts and at least 400 private Internet rehabilitation clinics nationwide.

Up to 60 percent of the nation's estimated online population of 338 million users were not of adult age, the health ministry said.

A Single Sign-In for All Your Websites? Google Hopes So

It's one of the basic tenets of online security: Never use the same password/username combo for every website that requires one. The logic is sound, of course. A single security breach could expose your most private information - such as banking and credit card numbers - to the bad guys.

Problem is, who can remember multiple passwords and usernames? Many times I've signed up for a service, returned to the site a few weeks later, and quickly realized that I couldn't remember my login details.

Google and other major online players, including AOL, Facebook, Microsoft Plaxo, MySpace, and Yahoo, are pitching a simpler alternative: A single password/username combo, such as your Google or Yahoo ID, for multiple sites. The concept, based on the industry standard OpenID 2.0 protocol isn't exactly new. In fact, Google announced over a year ago that it would support the single single-in plan.

However, industry support appears tepid for OpenID, as many popular sites still don't accept an OpenID login. Perhaps that's why The Official Google Blog on Tuesday beat the OpenID drum, and gave a quick run-through of how the service might benefit Facebook and Plaxo users.

A Gmail user who receives an invitation to use Facebook or Plaxo, for instance, won't have to create a new account for those services, but rather can log in using a Google ID:

As the Google Blog points out, this simplified sign-in eliminates a tedious, multistep process for Gmail users who join Plaxo. It's more secure too. Verification (in this example) is handled by Google, so Plaxo never sees your username and password. "Since you don't have to enter your password on additional sites, your password remains closer to you and is less likely to be misused," writes Google security product manager Eric Sachs.

OpenID is a great idea, but wider acceptance is needed for it to become truly useful. I suspect that Yahoo, Microsoft, and Google aren't truly comfortable with a single sign-in approach for their key properties. Today, for instance, I can't use my Yahoo ID to sign into my MSN account, nor can I use my Windows Live ID to enter Yahoo Mail.

In the mean time, I better work on my memorization skills.

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